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ABSTRACT

To examine the impact of ethical ideology, i.e., situationism (high relativism and idealism), subjectivism (high relativism/low idealism), absolutism (low relativism/high idealism), and exceptionism (low relativism and idealism), as well as the saliency of moral norms, and the situational consequences on moral behavior, 112 male and female college students were asked to mislead a confederate in a testing situation. Subjects were selected on the basis of their responses to the Ethics Position Questionnaire. After rating the confederate, subjects were asked to give him negative feedback suggesting that he had a low IQ (clearly a lie). Subjects were told that the information was simply feedback (nonsalient moral norm) or was a lie (salient moral norm). In addition, one half of the subjects were offered money for giving the information, while the other half were told the feedback would improve the test-taker's later performance. Subjects' compliance with the request was measured and self-evaluations were taken. An analysis of the results showed that, although positive consequences for self and salient moral norms led to decreased lying, highly idealistic subjects unexpectedly behaved the most immorally. Situationists and absolutists usually lied no matter what the consequences or the salience of moral norms. Exceptionists were less likely to lie if they would benefit personally. Subjectivists were less likely to lie if they stood to gain from the lie and the action was labelled a lie. (Author/BL)

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The Impact of Ethical Ideology on Moral Behavior

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Abstract

The impact of ethical ideology (absolutism, situationism, subjectivism, exceptionism), the saliency of moral norms, and the situational consequences on moral behavior was examined by asking subjects to mislead a confederate. Although positive consequences for self and salient moral norms led to decreased lying, highly idealistic subjects unexpectedly behaved the most immorally.

According to an ethical ideologies approach to moral judgment (e.g., Forsyth, 1980, 1981), people differ in moral outlook in two basic ways. First, individuals vary in their acceptance of universal moral rules; while some believe that moral absolutes should be used in making judgments, others relativistically assume that moral rules are of little use when formulating judgments. Second, while some individuals idealistically assume that desirable consequences will usually be obtainable, others with a more pragmatic outlook admit that negative consequences are often mixed with positive outcomes. These two dimensions--when dichotomized and crossed in a 2 x 2 typology--yield four distinct ethical perspectives that can be labelled situationism (high relativism and idealism), subjectivism (high relativism/low idealism), absolutism (low relativism/high idealism), and exceptionism (low relativism and idealism).

Although evidence indicates that individuals who adopt divergent ethical ideologies divaricate when making moral judgments (Forsyth, 1981; Forsyth, in press Pope & Forsyth, in press) and in reactions after behaving immorally (Berger & Forsyth, 1982), predictions about the impact of ideology on moral behavior cannot be made without taking into account the nature of the specific situation. According to the two-dimensional approach, a host of factors influence individuals' moral choices, but the conformity of actions to moral norms and the potential consequences of the action play particularly significant roles in determining behavior. As Schwartz has noted in examining the relevance of moral norms, "if a person construes a decision he faces to be a moral choice, relevant moral norms he holds are likely to be activated and affect his behavior" (1968, p. 355). In addition, the anticipated consequences of the action should also signficantly influence moral behavior, for behaviors are not judged solely on their conformity to moral principles, but also by the consequences they produce.

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To summarize briefly, the ethical ideologies perspective argues that these two situational factors (norms and consequences) will interact with ideology in determining moral behavior such that:

1. Situationists will be most likely to engage in immoral behavior when the behavior will lead to positive consequences for others.

2. Absolutists will be most likely to engage in immoral behavior when the relevance of moral norms is minimized in the social setting.

3. Subjectivists will be most likely to engage in immoral behavior when the behavior will lead to positive consequences for themselves.

4. Exceptionists will be most likely to engage in immoral behavior when the relevance of moral norms is minimized and the behavior will lead to positive consequences for themselves.

Method

Subjects. One hundred and twelve males and females were selected from a larger group of introductory psychology students on the basis of their responses to the Ethics Position Questionnaire; a paper and pencil of measure of ethical ideology.

Procedure. Subjects were shown a videotape of a male taking an intelligence test. Subjects, however, were led to believe that they were watching a closed-circuit television monitor, and that the test was being administered in the adjoining room. After rating the stimulus person, subjects were asked to give negative feedback to the test-taker suggesting that he had a very low IQ and would probably not finish college. In making this request--which was objectively a lie since the confederate's performance was clearly adequate--the experimenter emphasized that the information was simply a form of feedback (nonsalient moral norm) or that the information was a lie (salient moral norm). In addition, one half of the subjects were told that they would receive a bonus of three dollars by giving the information (either lie or feedback), while the remaining subjects were told that the information would probably lead to a "reactance" effect that would improve the test-taker's grades over the next few weeks. Subjects' compliance with the request was the key dependent measure, although measures of self-evaluation were also taken.

Results

Situational factors. The least amount of lying was obtained in the positive-consequences-for-self /moral norm condition. While an average of 76.2% of the subjects behaved immorally in the other three conditions, only 50.0% of the subjects lied when they were offered $3 and told that they would be lying rather than giving feedback; $\underline{X}^2(1) = 7.68$, $\underline{p} < .05$.

Personality factors. Personal idealism--but not relativism--influenced moral behavior, but in an unexpected fashion. Although high idealists espouse a personal philosophy that condemns lying to others, they were more likely to lie than the low idealists. Fully 91.66% of the situationists and absolutists (high idealists) agreed to tell the lie, while only 70.83% of the subjectivists and exceptionists (low idealists) complied with the experimenter's request.

Personality X situation interactions. In general, the situational factors did not interact with ethical ideology as predicted. As shown in Table 1, situationists and absolutists usually lied no matter what the consequences or salience of moral norms. Exceptionists, in contrast, were less likely to lie if they personally would benefit; $\underline{X}^2(1) = 3.75$, $\underline{p} = .05$. Lastly, to some extent subjectists were less likely to lie if they stood to gain from the lie and the action was labelled a lie; $\underline{X}^2(1) = 2.66$, $\underline{p} = .10$.

Discussion

Although moral behavior appears to be linked to ideology, the nature of the relationships obtained in the current research are surprising. While the content of an absolutist and situationist ideology suggests that these individuals would be less likely to violate moral rules, relatively high rates of lying were found for these idealistic groups.

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Table 1.

Percentage of Subjects Who Lied

	Positive Consequences For Oneself		Positive Consquences For Other Person	
	Salient	Nonsalient	Salient	Nonsalient
Absolutists	71.4	100.0	85.7	85.7
Exceptionists	42.9	42.9	71.4	85.7
Situationists	57.1	85.7	85.7	57.1
Subjectivists	28.6	71.4	71.4	71.4